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# Academic Leadership Journal

Leadership, Ethics, and Philosophy

[1]

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From time to time, scandals involving dishonest faculty practices generate some public discussion about the ethics of academe. A recent example is Joseph Ellis, the history professor disclosed to have fabricated a personal past respecting his involvement in Vietnam, civil-rights and peace movements (Gorn 2001). Often, as in this case, the discussion is short-lived and things soon return to normal?though one hopes that a greater appreciation of the centrality of integrity was gained. Even less attention is commonly paid to the ethics of institutional leadership. Yet, the latter is no less important and it often sets the context for individual faculty ethics.

In questionable behaviors of faculty and institutions alike, faulty world views are often involved. Tacit world views and unexamined presuppositions play large roles in the things we take for granted and the behaviors we consider natural. Without critically examining them, we can be led astray without realizing it. For that reason, philosophical reflection and analysis should play a central role in leadership activities?indeed, in all of academe.

For instance, a powerful Western world view elevates individuality and separateness at the expense of relationality and connection. Influenced by our culture, we often think in atomistic terms?that is, we think that things can be viewed in substantial separation from each other, without undue expense or loss of integrity. Atomistic world views and presuppositions view things and practices as relatively self-contained?as being what they are independent of their relationship to other things or to an enveloping and supportive context. Reality is seen as fragmented, composed of discrete, independent, and relatively self-sufficient units, related to each other only externally. Our behaviors often reflect and extend this kind of thinking. Universities are a case in point. It is a commonplace that universities are fragmented, whole fields of learning that lack both integration and

connection with other fields, and faculty are often isolated from each other and their students. This is often lamented as a cognitive expense?the concern is that we may be missing important information that comes only from having a broader point of view. That there is also an ethical expense to these atomistic assumptions is less often observed. Yet, institutions teach ethics by their behaviors as much as by their statements of purpose and by what goes on in the classroom. And when these behaviors are driven by atomistic assumptions, the stage is set for unfortunate consequences.

Atomism highlights a concept of power as control. Driven by controlling or unilateral power, individuals and institutions seek to implement their own agenda, and to block the conflicting or opposing agendas of others.<sup>[2]</sup>

Faculty and administrative politics are often exercises in unilateral power. Perhaps the most prevalent use of power in colleges and universities today, unilateral power is radically (and ironically) truncated. It omits the most important educational dimension of power?the opportunity and ability to be influenced by others. These others include the ideas, the ideals, the cultures, the systems of thought and human expression presented in the classes, the texts, and, above all, the conversations that constitute the experience of higher education. To be educated is to allow oneself to be influenced by this multiplicity of others, to evaluate and adjust their internal relationships, and to learn how and when to apply them personally and publicly.

Michael Oakeshott presents this understanding of education in his argument that the sole authentic activity of the college is fostering and conducting ?conversation?, and that the key activity of higher education teaching and learning is assisting students to engage in conversation with what he called the various voices, idioms, or modes of self-understanding that constitute our civilization and our inheritance. These voices represent the achievements of our predecessors in science, literature, art, philosophy, history, and so forth. They constitute our culture, indeed our civilization. Our very humanity consists in our learning how to possess, and then to dwell in, this inheritance. It constitutes a mirror by which we can recognize and acknowledge who we are. The importance of education as conversation is given wonderful expression in his collection of essays in

*The Voice of Liberal Learning: Michael Oakeshott on Education* (Fuller 1989). Other relevant essays by Oakeshott are to be found in

*Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays* (Oakeshott 1991).

But atomism remains dominant?as do the ethical separations it generates. For instance, academics often separate teaching from research. The implication seems to be that these are unrelated activities so far as educational integrity is involved. Thus, to misrepresent facts in the classroom is one thing, but actually to put them in print is another, far more serious, matter. Likewise, in the case of colleges and universities, public statements about the institution are often regarded as basically and properly malleable?to be crafted to accommodate some external situation, rather than to be reflective of the substance of the institution. How the institution wishes to appear is separated from its reality.

Thus, some institutions ?massage? the data they report publicly?providing popular guidebooks and ranking publications information that is carefully tailored to present the most attractive, rather than truthful, institutional face (Stecklow 1995). Or they provide ?doctored? photographs in their recruitment and advertising materials (Clegg 2000). Often these institutions also disguise their increasing dependence upon adjunct or part-time faculty, continuing to emphasize close faculty-student interaction?even though many of these faculty have no offices in which to meet students, are not paid to be on campus to do so, and are not engaged in the formulation or oversight of the curriculum.

An unhealthy atomism is presupposed in this unbundling of faculty functions. The construction of a course and the teaching of that course are no longer seen as two sides of an interrelated activity. Rather, atomism posits that at best these are loosely related activities with no inherent connection. The traditional position that teaching requires ongoing adjustments in the concepts and objectives of the course, and vice versa, is abandoned?as is the position that both course construction and teaching are enriched by relevant scholarship. Unbundling occurs in distance delivery of education as well as in traditional modes of instruction. In distance delivery it is often associated with for-profit institutions, or with for-profit subsidiaries within traditional not-for-profit institutions?as though instruction and profit have no bearing on one another, or that there is no inherent conflict between the two goals of profit for investors and learning for students.

Many correctly argue that these kinds of public institutional misrepresentations reflect poorly on the whole academy?on the minority involved in the practices, as well as on the majority who are not. But philosophical atomism abstracts from the relational nature of reality, holding that each institution must look first to its own good. There is no common good, except in some minimalist sense of an aggregation of

conflicting individual goods. There is no adequate self-regulation??No institution is known to have suffered sanctions for falsely reporting information to a guidebook or ranking source or for intentionally fabricating data reported to the public? (Corts 1997, 7).

In its broadest sense, atomism creates a bizarre educational philosophy. For surely education involves seeing, making, and understanding connections. As conversation, education entails interactions with others, not seriatim exchanges of unrelated soliloquies. To argue that the institutional behaviors we have noted are but small matters or somehow inevitable is to ignore how they actually undercut the integrity of higher education?an integrity which educational leadership should be pledged to support and advance. Yet with atomistic presuppositions in place, the fragmentation and compartmentalization of the college or university render it unable to generate lasting reforms.

What to do? Having been actively involved in leadership development activities for well over two decades, and having served in key faculty and administrative leadership positions, I appreciate more than ever the centrality of moral leadership in institutional representatives and key leaders. Developing skills in institutional planning and finance, conflict resolution, professional development, program review and development, donor cultivation and board relationships, legal issues, and so forth?these are important. But it is the uses to which these skills are put that is central.

A number of corporations have been moving to create ethics officers who report to the highest level of authority and play increasingly major roles in setting and reviewing corporate policy?even though we now know that accounting practices have often been kept to the side. Should higher education create specific ethics offices? One might argue that doing so sends a clear message that ethical behavior is a central objective of the college or university and that abuses of the trust with which society has invested educators are unacceptable. This could only be helpful. But I fear that the opposite effect might result?that an ethics office might be viewed as mere window-dressing or that academics might consider the issue of ethics to have been addressed by this office and thus no longer a central consideration for them. So I do not think that concentrating oversight of an institution?s commitment to truthfulness and educational integrity in one specially-created office is the way to go (Bennett 2001a).

Rather, the better course of action is to renew our commitment to education as conversation?to education as a conversation in which every issue of merit is explored and all voices are heard.<sup>[3]</sup>

Such conversations are by their nature never concluded, and what was a matter of an earlier consensus may well be reviewed and changed. Without a fundamental commitment to open, hospitable conversations, institutions of higher education seem little different from other businesses. They may still be less efficient, but they will have lost the very ground and purpose that would excuse their inefficiency. In the final analysis, the moral professionalism of the academy depends upon all of its members exercising self-regulation together. And identifying the educational expenses and ethical corruption of atomism is an essential part of this self-regulation.

Department chairpersons and deans are certainly in a good position to promote the kind of open conversation that reviews the adequacy of instruction; the fit among student, course, and societal need; the welcome extended to the newcomer; the recognition of the contributions and needs of individual faculty; the hospitality to the intellectually new and different ideas that ought to characterize both teaching and research, and so forth. Several recent publications have called attention to these and other roles that chairpersons and deans play and the challenges and opportunities before them (Bennett 1998, Hecht 1999, Leaming 1998, Lucas 1994). Chairpersons and deans are key players in the institution and their contributions are essential to educational success.

But institutional executives may be in the best location to assure that these kinds of conversations are a regular part of the institution's life. Presidents in particular have an obligation to set a high moral tone for the institution. Others will rise or fall to the expectations the chief executive sets—either by precept and code or (more likely) by his or her own example and behavior. However, everyone has a role in this conversation and a voice that should be heard. To be sure, the conversations are more difficult when it is the president or other executive officers who have the least interest in them—and who in some cases may be the prime agent of institutional untruth. In these situations, governing bodies and accrediting agencies may be unwilling to weigh in, but eventually the real truth will be known.

In the meantime, it is everyone's responsibility to become a philosopher—to reflect on the presuppositions and implications of his or her behavior. Atomism is a false and pernicious philosophy when taken as more than a temporary mechanism whereby a discrete issue might be clarified. It encourages and justifies unhelpful borders that separate us and fragment our educational work. It generates controlling rather than relational power. It reinforces self-promotion and self-protection rather than commitment to the larger common good. It undercuts the collaboration and cooperation necessary to the discovery,

validation, transmission, and extension of the truth we seek. It is profoundly harmful. But it is not the final or even the primary state of affairs. What is primary and ultimate is the relationality of the world?the connectivity that undergirds our efforts to understand and to help others do so as well. This is what leadership must emphasize.

For years academics have studied the ethical practices and shortcomings of other professions. Scholars have analyzed the ethics of business, health care, journalism, and law. In neglecting the integrity of our own affairs, we have been unfaithful to our fundamental educational purposes. Surely these purposes bear on the primary obligations we have to society and our students to support the common good and to advance the welfare of the learner?not the convenience of the faculty, the luster or pay of the executive, benefits to for-profit investors, or the comparative reputation of the institution.

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## ENDNOTES

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[1]. I present here some concepts developed in greater detail in

Academic Hospitality, Ethics, and Spirituality?forthcoming from Anker Press in 2003.

[2]. For a classic elaboration of this concept, see Bernard Loomer, "Two Kinds of Power."

[3]. For more on what this involves, see my "Liberal Learning as Conversation."

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